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### Peering into the future

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**Peering into the future: British Conservative leaders and the problem of national renewal, 1942-5**

Robert Crowcroft

**Abstract**

This article excavates how some key Conservative leaders conceptualised the problem of ‘the future’ in the final stages of the Second World War. It contends that the mental map employed by senior Conservative for navigating the challenges of post-war national renewal has remained significantly misunderstood. The article conducts a close reading of Conservative positions on a range of issues – from economic modernisation and constitutional propriety to geopolitical tensions – and highlights some previously neglected dimensions to domestic political debate. It concludes that the arguments developed by Conservative leaders were more sophisticated and coherent than has often been recognised.

Political conflict in Britain during the latter half of the Second World War has long attracted the attention of historians.<sup>1</sup> A sizeable body of work has appeared, principally examining the impact of Sir William Beveridge's landmark study of state provision published in December 1942. After the release of *Social Insurance and Allied Services* – popularly known as the Beveridge report – for the remainder of the war the challenge of securing national renewal was the issue around which politics came to revolve. Many scholars have traced a thread from the publication of the report to the landslide victory of the Labour party at the July 1945 general election. The problem of national renewal divided the coalition government of Winston Churchill, for Labour and the Conservatives possessed somewhat different visions of the future, and – still more so – how that future might be realised. The explanation for Labour's success has generated a rich corpus of literature.<sup>2</sup> That work continues to be expanded.<sup>3</sup>

This article develops a fresh perspective on political debate in Britain at a crucial moment of national and international transition. Its purpose is futurology: it excavates how some important Conservative ministers – individuals who made decisions and shaped policy – discerned the shape of the future. The inescapable fact is that Conservative positions in the latter half of the war have been the subject of much misunderstanding, even outright myth. This has centred on the belief that, because of doctrinal scepticism towards the Beveridge report, Conservative leaders sought to evade the issue of national renewal as much as possible – in contrast to Labour's eager commitment to the report. Indeed, that was one of a whole series of wartime 'myths', which, as Andrew Thorpe has argued, were created by contemporaries for instrumental purposes yet rapidly became 'conventional wisdoms'.<sup>4</sup> Crucially, those 'conventional wisdoms' shaped not only popular views but have long impacted the historiographical agenda as well. But the myths surrounding the Conservatives and renewal were generally social democratic in origin and orientation; there was, and

remains, a strong underlying preference for the Beveridge report, and Labour, as being on the side of modernity and ‘progress’.<sup>5</sup> In seeking to address this, the article reconstructs what key Conservative ministers saw when they peered into what Churchill called ‘the mists of the future’.<sup>6</sup> It considers the challenges that they anticipated would confront the post-war British state, as well as the priorities they identified in tackling them. In doing so, the article widens the discussion about national renewal beyond the parameters established by the Beveridge report and examines the themes that leading Conservatives *themselves* deemed most significant.

The failure to fully excavate the outlook of Conservative leaders at a moment of profound challenge to the liberal state is odd, because several scholars have examined Conservative responses to Beveridge.<sup>7</sup> Broadly speaking, historians have perceived Conservative reactions to renewal as awkward: opposing the Beveridge report for its expense (or principles), but being unwilling to say so and thus working quietly to impede progress. Churchill’s own intermittent interest in reform, consumed as he was by the war, has frequently been noted.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, however, the Conservative reaction has conventionally been considered alongside, and thus *measured against*, Labour’s vision. The outcome has been that historians have compared it to that of Labour, and found it wanting – just as the public did in 1945. Moreover – and this is vital – such a view risks conflating the Beveridge report with national renewal more broadly. This was an association that Conservatives energetically disputed – and therein lays the point of this article.

In fact, the reaction of leading Conservatives ministers, and their subsequent thinking about national renewal, was better developed than has often been realised. The article will show that they framed the issue of renewal within a set of coordinates quite different from those of their coalition partners. Their arguments hinged on finance, trade, defence and foreign policy. Science, technology and constitutional propriety were also crucial. We therefore need to think

imaginatively and move beyond the confines of a historiography shaped disproportionately by Beveridge and affection for the Labour-led social democratic order which emerged from the war. In addition, there was a critical temporal component at work here, too.<sup>9</sup> Wartime political debate was intensely temporal. Labour's positions, and campaigning, promised the public an appealing encounter with eternity. Finality was at the core of the party's message by 1945. The worldview developed by senior Conservative ministers, in contrast, did not elevate its horizons much beyond the here-and-now. *When* was often more important than *what*. As the article will show, the Conservative analysis was consistently framed by two things: *priorities* and *timing*.

Conducting a close reading of Conservative positions, the article reconstructs the languages and conceptual vocabularies used by some Conservative politicians in imagining an uncertain future. Ewen Green's effort to understand the logic of Conservative positions and show how they defined the problems they faced was important in constructing an intellectual history of the party; his work underlined the need to treat the Conservatives' 'map of the world' with appropriate scrutiny.<sup>10</sup> The period between 1942 and 1945 benefits from a similar exercise in mental cartography.<sup>11</sup> This article places particular emphasis upon the role of Sir Kingsley Wood, Chancellor of the Exchequer from May 1940 until his sudden death in September 1943. A veteran Conservative minister, Wood has been largely overlooked by scholars<sup>12</sup> but in fact was a key actor in wartime politics. Between 1940-1 he played a crucial role in stabilising the coalition, and establishing its political legitimacy, through the construction of a 'fair' financial policy to pay for the war.<sup>13</sup> In late 1942, he was at the fore of attempts to avoid damaging rows within the government over the Beveridge report. And when this failed, Wood took the lead in developing the Conservatives' own position on national renewal, partly through a dialogue with the Beveridge report and partly through arguing that there was much more to be considered. This was a key moment, for Wood's vision of problems and

possibilities in renewal endured after his death. Indeed, it arguably determined the posture adopted by the Conservative leadership down to the 1945 election.

This analysis requires a shift in focus from much of the existing literature. It necessitates separating Conservative arguments from those of Labour and treating them seriously on their own terms. This is surprisingly challenging. For many contemporaries, ‘unquestioning acceptance of Beveridge’ became ‘a litmus test’ of basic ‘decency’.<sup>14</sup> Even among scholars, there exists a robust Labour-welfarist orthodoxy partly rooted in the fact that many historians have, directly or otherwise, expressed sympathy for the Beveridge report.<sup>15</sup> Recent work by David Edgerton has argued the case for a break from ‘welfarist’ accounts of the war, and while those accounts perhaps have more to recommend them than he allows, nevertheless his point is an important one.<sup>16</sup> From a different angle, Ben Jackson has also demonstrated the fruitful possibilities of rethinking established assumptions about the expression of political ideas in this period.<sup>17</sup> In addition, there has always been a powerful historiographical tendency to approach the issue examined in the article through the lens of Addison’s wartime ‘consensus’. While the arguments over consensus have rightly been central to the historiography of wartime politics for forty years, it is unsatisfactory to reduce all possible problems to the debate about whether or not there was a ‘consensus’. Here, we should perform a quite deliberate act of separation. To properly contextualise the Conservative position on national renewal, we need to broaden the focus from the themes Labour identified and campaigned on to those which Conservatives deemed crucial. The leaders of the largest party in the coalition flatly rejected the notion that *Social Insurance and Allied Services* should determine the parameters of debate. Rather than plotting this along a simple ‘pro’- or ‘anti’-Beveridge axis, then, what is required is a more nuanced, multi-layered analysis. Instead of simplifying matters, the article aims to complicate them by showing that what Conservatives were arguing about was often quite different to their opponents. Several

dialogues were occurring simultaneously. The tying together of Beveridge and national renewal is central to the framing of what Edgerton termed the ‘social democratic historiography of Britain between 1939 and 1951’.<sup>18</sup> While that historiography has merit, it is not really reflective of the position as Conservative leaders defined it between 1942 and 1945.

Contrary to narrow mythologies still recycled with regularity,<sup>19</sup> the reality is that leading Conservatives engaged seriously, and in depth, with the problem of national renewal. They developed the outlines of a clear strategy. Priorities were established, problems identified, and alternatives weighed. Thus, while many in the party were certainly sceptical about, and even hostile to, the notion of major social reform,<sup>20</sup> others – especially *senior* Conservatives, those with the power of decision-making – were more flexible, recognising the need to respond to Beveridge and Labour.<sup>21</sup> Some were enthusiastic about building a better future. The work of R.A. Butler has usually been pointed to as an example of constructive conservatism,<sup>22</sup> but as the article will suggest, the reality is more complex. Wood and his successor at the Treasury, Sir John Anderson, were more significant.<sup>23</sup> Anderson, though ostensibly a ‘National’ MP, was in practice a Conservative.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile Churchill’s anxieties about the Soviet Union occupied a central place in his views on national renewal.

Drawing on a range of papers, the article recreates the outlines of their vision. Whilst any commitment to implement the Beveridge report in full after the war – let alone during it, as Labour demanded – was avoided, from late 1942 key figures still began to think carefully about the management of finite resources upon the cessation of hostilities, how prosperity was to be restored while costly public services were expanded, and what the international landscape would look like. Outlining this worldview has several components. Some significant documentary evidence, especially papers drawn up in early 1943, has not been properly examined in previous literature. Yet these papers shaped Conservative strategy for

the remainder of the war and force us to rethink events. Moreover there is a need to fully integrate the international, particularly Soviet, dimension within the analysis. Economic assessments of reform were shaped from the beginning by a range of acute geopolitical anxieties. And because of the failure to properly contextualise earlier developments, the Conservatives' much-criticised 1945 manifesto has also frequently mystified. In fact, this mystification is easily resolvable so long as we do not take the Beveridge report as our lodestar.

## I

In the judgement of virtually all Conservatives, life in the immediate post-war years was likely to be defined by prolonged hardship and economic instability. There was little confidence that this could be avoided. Conflict with the Axis powers had left the country facing large debts and dislocation; problems of demobilisation would be compounded by the collapse of international trade. Recovery was likely to prove slow, and success was uncertain. This was the prism through which senior Conservative ministers, working at the sharp end of policy, viewed the world. Churchill was always quick to dismiss any hope that the end of the war would lead to 'Utopia' or 'Eldorado'.<sup>25</sup> His colleagues shared the same sentiment.<sup>26</sup> The activities of the government's leading Conservatives must therefore be understood in these terms. As alluded to earlier, there was also an important – if often unspoken – temporal dimension to the debate, too. Historians have recently begun to engage with the significance of 'time' in the minds of politicians.<sup>27</sup> For senior Conservatives, getting the timing of reform measures right was significant. This was one area where Conservatives gave more thought to reform than their rivals. Aware of the huge popularity of Beveridge's scheme for an



expanded welfare state that would offer coverage ‘from cradle to grave’, the Labour leadership desired the coalition to pass legislation to put the reforms outlined by Beveridge into immediate effect at the end of the war; many in the party wanted them implemented even while the conflict continued. Senior Conservatives, in contrast, favoured a gradual and incremental process. That would, moreover, depend on the recovery of trade and the architecture of international security. The importance of this was manifested in the fact that many of the Conservative arguments developed here were framed with explicit reference to a temporal situation. While it would be naïve to hold that procrastination did not serve a party-political purpose in the coalition, nevertheless the same vision was offered to the electorate in 1945. As such, we should conclude that leading figures did think carefully about timeframes and the problem of prioritising between competing claims for resources.

Even before his report was published in December 1942, Beveridge spent several months hinting to the press that he was to propose a major expansion of the welfare state.<sup>28</sup> His leaks aggravated politicians from both parties. The man himself was widely disliked.<sup>29</sup> He was an energetic self-publicist engaged in an obviously political campaign to disrupt the government. Indeed, to some extent Beveridge himself was the architect of his own mythology, his constant appearances in the press calculated to ensure that national renewal quickly came to be seen as indistinguishable from *Social Insurance and Allied Services*.<sup>30</sup>

The first Conservative to grapple with the issues raised by the report was the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Kingsley Wood. Over the next few months Wood contributed more than any other Conservative to shaping the party’s stance on post-war reconstruction. A former ally of Chamberlain, he had thrown his weight behind Churchill in May 1940 and been rewarded with the Treasury.<sup>31</sup> From there he crafted a radical, and politically sustainable, method of financing the war effort.<sup>32</sup> This afforded him an important role in coalition management.<sup>33</sup> Wood possessed sensitive political antennae and quickly recognised the disruptive potential

of the Beveridge proposals. Paying a visit to the Chancellor on 26 August 1942, Butler found him ruminating that the publication of *Social Insurance and Allied Services* would be ‘the big event of the year’.<sup>34</sup> He feared that ‘it would not go well’. Wood remarked it would be best ‘if Beveridge came out with as many high-minded and fantastic suggestions as possible’.

Yet Wood boasted a record of commitment to progressive causes – in 1918 he earned a knighthood for running a national petition calling upon the government to establish a Ministry of Health, served as Neville Chamberlain’s deputy at Health for five years between 1924-29, and was himself Minister of Health between 1935-38. He told Butler that the country would ‘need’ social reform after the war, and asked him to ‘proceed energetically’ with his ideas for education. It would be an over-simplification to conclude that the Chancellor opposed the report because he was hostile to progressive legislation. Rather, his objection was a sense that Beveridge himself was being less than straight. As Butler left that evening, Wood ‘warned me ... to take great care with Beveridge’.<sup>35</sup> When Beveridge presented his proposals to the media as being easily affordable, the Chancellor’s hackles were raised; he wrote to the prime minister complaining that ‘politics are already beginning to be played about this report’.<sup>36</sup> But both Wood and Churchill recognised that it was ‘not worth having a row’ by trying to silence Beveridge.<sup>37</sup> The Chancellor was wary of the government being pressured into giving a premature endorsement of the reforms. Privately, he reckoned that it would be ‘months’ before a considered judgement could be reached.<sup>38</sup>

Between November 1942 and June 1943, the Chancellor therefore sought to head off problems within the coalition by initiating a cross-party dialogue about the future relationship between state and citizen. This section conducts a careful reading of the positions adopted and selects recurrent themes and rhetoric in Wood’s arguments in order to build up an understanding of the worldview that took shape among Conservative decision-makers.

The first step was to try and win the support of the Labour leadership for a cautious attitude toward *Social Insurance and Allied Services*. Wood approached a Labour minister, Sir William Jowitt – the head of the government’s Reconstruction Problems Committee – and pressed him to take the lead in making the case against any formal state commitment to implement the report in full. Jowitt took up the cause, and on 14 November circulated a five-page memorandum to the War Cabinet in which he acknowledged that Wood had ‘asked me to say a word of warning on the subject of finance’.<sup>39</sup> This document bore the stark heading ‘Reconstruction is not the framing of Utopias’ and stressed that Britain lacked the resources to restore prosperity while meeting all conceivable claims for reconstruction funds. Importantly, it called upon the coalition to determine a clear ‘order of priorities’ by which planning would be guided.<sup>40</sup>

Warning that ‘we cannot do everything at once’ – a temporally-situated argument in itself – Jowitt’s paper was remarkably similar to those produced in subsequent months by the Chancellor. It outlined a range of options for funding – defence, demobilisation, employment, food and raw materials, controls, housing, foreign aid, economic growth, social security, health, town and countryside planning, agriculture, forestry, utilities, and education – which were *exactly* those later used by the Chancellor. It seems reasonable to intuit that not only had Wood put Jowitt up to writing the memorandum, but he also had a hand in its contents. Days later, Jowitt wrote to Churchill and offered to try and ‘restrain Sir William Beveridge from expounding his report or advocating the adoption of its recommendations’.<sup>41</sup>

In seeking to work through, rather than against, the Conservatives’ partners – pressing a Labour minister to be the first to raise the issue of finite resources – it is logical to conclude that Wood was hoping to enlist that party’s backing. When the War Cabinet discussed Jowitt’s memorandum on 19 November, Wood was the first to speak and declared that ‘Surely this is OK ... we can’t go too fast’.<sup>42</sup> He reiterated Jowitt’s call for the parties to work

together to determine priorities, suggesting the formation of a ‘committee of ministers’.

Despite the enthusiasm of Labour leaders for the report, the War Cabinet agreed that an immediate commitment to Beveridge’s programme was inadvisable.<sup>43</sup>

Yet while trying to avoid the government dividing along party lines, Wood had developed a private view of the Beveridge report. He sent Churchill ‘preliminary reflections of a critical character’, in a memorandum marked ‘Secret: for PM only’. This suggested that while ‘a general overhaul of the social insurances is no doubt very desirable ... the scheme regarded as a whole ... involves an impracticable financial commitment’.<sup>44</sup> ‘Particular proposals’ might be adopted, but whether they could be ‘reasonably’ afforded must be ‘the subject of close study’. The document went on to express concern about each of Beveridge’s core assumptions, particularly whether unemployment ‘can and will be substantially eliminated’, and suggested that the envisaged state medical service would prove more expensive than indicated, with Beveridge ‘offer[ing] no real solution’ to the question of funding. The paper also warned that taxation would become damagingly high:

Will 4/8 in the £ of the national income (or more if prosperity is not attained) be tolerable at all in peace? This grim picture is not lacking in justification, for we shall be bearing ... the cost of armed forces of considerable power, the burden of debt of two world wars (£500m per annum or more), together with the burden of pre-war social services (apart from the new “social security”) practically without parallel in the world. Is this the time to assume that the general taxpayer has a bottomless purse?<sup>45</sup>

This argument indicated that reform was necessary, but implementing the full contents of the Beveridge report could represent too heavy a burden given that government would *simultaneously* be confronted with the urgency of restoring economic competitiveness and retaining military power sufficient to police the defeated states. The Chancellor concluded that

Many in this country have persuaded themselves that the cessation of hostilities will mark the opening of the Golden Age (many were so persuaded last time also). However this may be, the time for declaring a dividend on the profits of the Golden Age is the time when those profits have been realised in fact, not merely in imagination.<sup>46</sup>

Charting the debate in terms of whether political parties were pro- or anti-Beveridge perhaps risks misinterpreting the developing attitude of Conservative leaders to the task of rebuilding Britain. The Chancellor was anxious to link aspirations to resources, while avoiding what he saw as unwarranted optimism. He was also cognisant of the grave difficulties in implementing reform that had been experienced at the end of the First World War. The fact that even in private correspondence there was no doctrinal hostility to social security is significant. Rather, this seems to have been a debate about priorities. The themes identified by Wood were to shape Conservative attitudes until 1945.

## II

The hope of developing a cross-party approach was dashed by the publication of the Beveridge report in December. Popular opinion was taken with its vision and the document quickly became a national phenomenon. There are few parallels to the effect it had on the public mood, something confirmed by the contemporary work of Mass Observation.<sup>47</sup> ‘The world as we knew it has gone for good’.<sup>48</sup> Very quickly, ‘the great majority’ of the people held ‘definite views’ on social security.<sup>49</sup> With opinions polls showing eighty-seven per cent backing for the report, the Labour movement was swept along in its wake. Labour came out in favour of an unequivocal endorsement of the entire report, as well as a commitment to bring it into effect before the end of the war.<sup>50</sup> But for Conservative leaders, the Beveridge

report initiated a quite different intellectual process than it did for Labour (or the public); social security was merely one of several considerations. This is where we need to broaden the parameters beyond those set by Beveridge and Labour. In early 1943 Wood therefore became more assertive in articulating a separate Conservative approach.

On 14 January, the Chancellor brought two detailed memoranda before the War Cabinet. These crucial papers represent the strongest expression of Conservative attitudes on reconstruction produced during the war. They were also perhaps the most confrontational political documents crafted between 1940 and 1945. Yet, surprisingly, historians have not examined them in any detail. This is a striking omission.

The first document was the more overtly political of the two. Authored by Wood himself, this was just two pages long but poured cold water over hopes for rapid social improvement:

Whilst I believe we can look forward with confidence to the future of our country, it is obvious that in the post-war period we shall be faced with problems even more anxious than in the time of war itself. It would therefore be but prudent to avoid at this time large and continuing commitments unless there is an overwhelming case for them.<sup>51</sup>

Moreover there were other ‘strongly pressed claims’ on the limited funds that would be available after the war. Wood took the opportunity to set out his own sense of priorities.

Defence expenditure to maintain international peace would be ‘rightly demanded above all else’. The defeated states would need to be occupied and further conflict deterred through the long-term retention of large armed forces, underpinned by an activist strategic posture. Next came the ‘full restoration’ of trade, without which the ‘fullest employment’ could not be achieved; the paper argued that exports would need to grow by 50 per cent over the pre-war level, while ‘all sections of the community’ expected wartime taxation to be substantially reduced. Wood wrote that ‘The cost of new social schemes and services, however beneficent

and desirable, must be balanced against these facts'.<sup>52</sup> The potential avenues for funding identified in Jowitt's earlier memorandum were reiterated, and the government once again challenged to '*assess these claims and determine some order of priorities*'. Wood felt housing and employment to be the most pressing claims for money.<sup>53</sup>

This repeated emphasis on priorities is important. The Chancellor had set out what would become the long-term Conservative position on reform: defence and economic renewal needed to come first, and beyond that an order of social priorities must be agreed. Turning to the Beveridge report itself, the memorandum argued that *all* of the assumptions on which *Social Insurance and Allied Services* had estimated the cost of the proposed measures were problematic. It suggested that unemployment could conceivably exceed the 8.5 per cent allowed for, that rates of benefit would have to be raised to keep pace with the national subsistence minimum, that high taxation may prove unpopular and reduce living standards, and that increased national insurance burdens on employers might make the difference between success and failure in competitive export markets.<sup>54</sup> Wood maintained that if *any* of Beveridge's assumptions were proven wrong, the financial viability of his scheme would collapse.

The memorandum was accompanied by a longer, more detailed paper drawn up by Treasury officials. This extended over six pages and assessed the costs of Beveridge's plans in detail.<sup>55</sup> Significantly, the department objected that it was being asked to commit future taxpayers to a permanent burden with little likelihood of controlling the associated expense. Utilising Beveridge's own assumptions about costs, taxable national income three years after the war, a successful export drive and unemployment levels, the Treasury also assumed that there would be no reduction of working hours in peacetime. It calculated that this might yield a

budget surplus of £925m after existing commitments were met. That would need to cover the costs of the armed forces necessary to pursue a forward-facing British grand strategy (projected at £500m p.a.), the resumption of the sinking fund (£100m p.a.), reductions in taxation, new social services, and any other measures such as assistance to export industries or to combat unemployment.<sup>56</sup> The paper concluded that the Beveridge reforms were unaffordable if economic competitiveness was to be restored at the same time. As such there was little sense in committing to legislation when the availability of resources remained uncertain. Faced with these arguments, the War Cabinet agreed to continue studying the report.<sup>57</sup> But rumours of Conservative pessimism were soon leaked to the press.<sup>58</sup>

For the purposes of this article, the financial validity of the Chancellor's assumptions is unimportant. Politicking was an important part of the situation, with Beveridge himself 'having the fun of my life' and relishing the fact that the report 'may bring down a government'.<sup>59</sup> What *is* significant is that a clear Conservative line of argument had been developed and tested. There was an obvious tactical objective to Wood's intervention: in the context of escalating enthusiasm for Beveridge, it resembled a bid to discredit his report and bury it under a mass of statistics. Yet there was also more than that – an anxiety that public debate assumed that all things were possible upon the termination of military hostilities. Wood worried that 'the contrary argument does not so often find expression'.<sup>60</sup> Conservatives of all tendencies – from activists and MPs worried about creeping socialism to those ministers who looked more favourably upon progressive legislation – feared that the end of the war would expose the weakness of Britain's position and usher in a rapid decline unless urgent steps were taken. Within this bleak vision of the future, the problem was that the Beveridge report and its advocates were wagering on a benign global environment, low



unemployment *and* economic renewal – as well as the fact that the growth of national income would keep pace with increased demands. This was considered doubtful.

The cautious public position that Conservative leaders imposed on the government struck the wrong note with the electorate. One Mass Observation diarist detected ‘sinister shadows of post-war trickery’.<sup>61</sup> Churchill was certainly culpable; he had long failed to give a lead, either because of his focus on the war or because he preferred to leave this problem to others. Yet emphasising the presentational missteps of Conservatives – for instance Anderson and Wood’s famously disastrous performance in the House of Commons debate on social security in February 1943, during which they failed to stress that the coalition was keen to pursue reformist measures where feasible, instead concentrating on financial uncertainty – overlooks the fact that the position taking shape was not one of outright hostility to reform. John Anderson – assisted by Oliver Lyttelton, Jowitt, and Bevin – had worked to craft a ‘joint motion’ from the coalition partners. This recommended that the government indicate to Parliament its acceptance of a ‘universal’ health service, an expansion of welfare and full employment, while tethering this to the issue of cost.<sup>62</sup> At this point Churchill finally intervened, and, in doing so, added an interesting component to the Conservative position. He wrote that ‘the rescue of the millions’ was ‘essential’ to ‘any post-war scheme of national betterment’, but

We cannot however initiate the legislation now or commit ourselves to the expenditure involved. That can only be done by a responsible Government and a House of Commons refreshed by contact with the people ... We must not forget that we are a Parliament in the eighth year ... We have no right whatever to tie the hands of future Parliaments in regard to social matters which are their proper province. I could not as Prime Minister be responsible at this stage for binding my successor whoever he may be without knowledge of the conditions under which he will undertake his responsibilities.<sup>63</sup>

This was an interesting supplementation to the Conservative argument. It represented, at root, a *constitutional* case: that there was no mandate for the Beveridge reforms and restricting the freedom of future governments was inappropriate. When that is set alongside finance, trade and defence we can discern the outlines of a mental map quite different from that of Labour. Wood took up this baton, arguing in the War Cabinet that the coalition ‘must reserve to the government of the day the final decision’.<sup>64</sup> The Cabinet Secretary recorded him as saying ‘that is what every government does. What’s wrong with that?’<sup>65</sup>

Subsequent cross-party disputes in 1943 have been well-documented by historians and generated more heat than light, with Labour ministers pressing for the government to make a ‘best forecast’ of economic conditions at the end of the war and proceed on that basis,<sup>66</sup> while Churchill thought that the matter had become ‘purely political’.<sup>67</sup> But in July, Wood produced a memorandum which, significantly, relied exclusively on making connections between temporal arguments and the language of constitutional propriety. Italicising phrases that stressed these themes, this paper reiterated that decisions after the war would have to be made in light of the circumstances ‘*which might prevail at that time*’; responsibility could only rest with the ministry ‘*of the day*’, and it was ‘*their duty alone*’ to take such decisions; nothing could be implemented ‘*until the end of the war*’; and ‘*when this plan has been shaped it will have to be presented to the country*’.<sup>68</sup> The language chosen and concepts used seems crucial. When asked in 1961 whether the principles of the Beveridge report had been accepted on ‘both sides of the Cabinet’, Attlee replied ‘Oh yes. [But] there was the question of *when* it should come in, of course, which was not very easy’.<sup>69</sup>

If Beveridge had fixed the terms of debate for the Labour party, Wood provided them for the Conservatives. This framework was substantially wider than public services or welfare; indeed, those themes were often secondary. Some within the party had been thinking about post-war issues throughout 1942, but made relatively little impact.<sup>70</sup> In contrast, the

Chancellor's views shaped the attitude of his party down to the 1945 election. Historians should perhaps take these arguments – particularly their strikingly consistent emphasis on timing, priorities, defence and propriety – more seriously than has previously been the case. Those themes dominated Conservative strategy and offer insights into how senior figures proposed to pursue national renewal. Backbench and rank-and-file opinion were frequently hostile to the expansion of social services, but a more nuanced approach had been adopted at the upper levels of government.

### III

On the evening of 21 March, Churchill broadcast to the nation over BBC radio and *publicly* stated the Conservative position for the first time. This was a significant moment because the nexus of anxieties that had been expressed behind closed doors was now revealed to the electorate. The prime minister spent three weeks drafting this speech – an indication that he recognised the acute sensitivities that were developing over visions of the future – and consulted John Maynard Keynes on the content.<sup>71</sup> Churchill explained to his listeners that he intended to 'peer through the mists of the future'.<sup>72</sup> Warning of attempts to 'coerce' the government into making pledges 'in conditions which no one can foresee and which may be years ahead, to impose great new expenditures on the state without any relation to the circumstances which might prevail at that time', he advised that this would turn the 'parliamentary system' into a collection of 'pledge-bound delegates'. 'Nothing would be easier for me than to make any number of promises to get the immediate response of cheap cheers' by telling 'all kinds of fairy tales'. This was a reiteration of the dual themes of timing and political probity. It paralleled an argument he had made privately to Cabinet colleagues:

‘Nothing would be more dangerous than for people to feel cheated because they had been led to expect attractive schemes which turn out to be economically impossible’.<sup>73</sup> Churchill expressed a further temporal anxiety in that a declining birth rate would leave taxpayers unable to fund social services within ‘twenty to thirty years’.<sup>74</sup>

The prime minister laid heavy emphasis on the future geopolitics of Europe and the world, and how this would necessitate a security alliance between the victorious states to ‘garrison’ the ‘guilty countries’ and deter future wars. Before that even became possible, however, Churchill reminded his audience that upon the defeat of Germany a long, bloody struggle to conquer Japan would follow as ‘our first and supreme task’. Meanwhile the ‘stupendous business’ of rebuilding European stability would represent a further arduous and protracted duty. ‘Widespread famine’ across the continent was an immediate danger, but the real threat was the rapid restoration of national rivalries in a power vacuum. Only the ongoing collaboration of ‘Britain, the United States and Russia’ could overawe potential challengers to peace and avert this.

Though the prime minister was clearly most invested in military issues, he used the speech to publicly propose a ‘four-year plan’ for domestic reconstruction. This would ‘cover five or six large measures’. Churchill wanted the ‘extension’ of social insurance to be the first ‘great advance’, while food production might be regenerated, a ‘national health service’ established, and education become ‘broader’ to secure ‘equal opportunity for all’. Meanwhile taxation must be reduced and ‘vigorous private enterprise’ revived, exports had to increase and the demand for consumer goods would return. These demands might limit the reconstruction measures that could be immediately afforded, but in restoring long-term prosperity they

would ensure that the cost was sustainable. Churchill's summary of his position was 'no promises [while the war continued] but every preparation'.<sup>75</sup>

A widespread public perception that the prime minister was not focused on domestic affairs proved a boon for the Labour party. Mass Observation found a feeling of popular 'estrangement' and the 'strong' impression 'that MPs are not really representing the country's interests, nor leading the country towards a better [future]'.<sup>76</sup> But, nevertheless, Churchill had restated the approach developed by Wood and – in a national broadcast – adopted it as that of the Conservatives. International stability and British economic competitiveness would come first, but goals for reconstruction not dissimilar to those favoured by the Conservatives' opponents were also on the agenda.

When the development of this position is properly scrutinised, and not simply compared to that of Labour,<sup>77</sup> it therefore becomes problematic to depict Churchill as insincere on reform; he had, after all, been one of the architects of the New Liberalism. Rather, as Richard Toye stressed, the issue was that domestic debates represented a distraction from the 'main task'.<sup>78</sup> Churchill told the socialist intellectual Harold Laski that engaging with the latter's detailed plans for reform was 'entirely beyond my share of life and strength'.<sup>79</sup> The attitude articulated by the prime minister and Chancellor hinged on the belief that delivering peace, prosperity and reform would necessitate a complex balancing-act.

Other senior Conservative ministers began to echo this, developing the theme that an economic renaissance was necessary. The Minister of Production, Oliver Lyttelton, argued in the War Cabinet that Beveridge offered only an 'incomplete approach' to the achievement of 'social security'. As *Social Insurance and Allied Services* was not a blueprint for economic prosperity, 'it does not touch the essential problem of creating the background of reasonable

*stability* [in terms of trade] *which any such scheme requires for its success*'.<sup>80</sup> Without a plan for economic renewal, the report was lacking its 'proper setting'. Lyttelton and Anderson soon began pressing Whitehall departments to focus on industrial research and development as part of the drive to rebuild prosperity.<sup>81</sup> As Edgerton has shown, an interest in 'modernisation' was ubiquitous at this time, and not restricted to any one party.<sup>82</sup> And after Wood's death in September 1943, it was Lindemann who took up the task of seeking to establish a hierarchy of priorities. He set before the War Cabinet a memorandum that grappled with the pace of demobilisation, whether the essential work order was to be maintained, the balance between producing exports and domestic consumer goods, and the apparatus of rationing.<sup>83</sup> Lindemann proposed that the introduction of measures of 'social betterment' should be explicitly linked to the rejuvenation of industry within Churchill's 'four-year plan'.<sup>84</sup> The Conservatives' Central Committee on Post-War Reconstruction echoed this in a report on demobilisation.<sup>85</sup> In response to Lindemann, Churchill resolved that the 'most urgent' priorities during the transition at the end of the war were '(a) demobilisation... (b) increased food production... (c) the resumption of the export trade ... (d) the general turn-over of industry from war to peace and ... (e) employment'.<sup>86</sup> Implementing the Beveridge report was not identified as an immediate task.

#### IV

In properly contextualising the Conservative position on reform, we should reiterate that it was underpinned by a series of geopolitical and strategic assessments. This international backdrop is crucial, for it impacted Conservative decision-making in the domestic sphere in important ways. It constituted a key part of the mental landscape of Conservative leaders in

ways that have not often been recognised in literature fixated with Beveridge and social democracy. We have already seen Wood's warnings about the long-term cost of powerful armed forces sufficiently strong to deter another World War. Churchill had expanded upon this, making the theme central to his BBC speech.

The prime minister (and informed opinion on both sides of the Atlantic) expected the defeat of Japan to require two years after victory over Germany, and (in 1943) proceeded on the assumption that the war would end around early 1948.<sup>87</sup> Though the public had always felt detached from the conflict with Japan,<sup>88</sup> Churchill was concerned with the likelihood of a long struggle to subdue the Japanese. Even in the spring of 1945, he expended a great deal of energy seeking to avert the collapse of the coalition government and ensure its continuation until victory over Japan.<sup>89</sup> When we consider that most believed the Second World War would last for a considerable period beyond the fall of the Third Reich, it is possible to develop a more nuanced understanding of Churchill's reluctance to press ahead with a programme of social reforms in 1943. The sudden effect of nuclear weaponry on Japan in the summer of 1945 was impossible to foresee; as such, for Churchill and his allies the preparation of schemes that would not be implemented until late in the decade had an air of unreality. In excavating their decision-making, this needs to be taken into account. Moreover, it had long been assumed by leaders in Allied capitals that, even when the Axis powers were indeed defeated, international politics thereafter would likely centre on the Allies watching for, and deterring, any attempt by Germany and Japan to re-emerge as a threat. Churchill had been planning for this as early as the Atlantic Charter in 1941,<sup>90</sup> and discussed the imperative to 'garrison' the Axis powers in his March 1943 broadcast. Meanwhile a reading of the United Nations Charter in its proper historical context makes clear that it explicitly sought to establish a traditional concert of powers through which the Allies would actively police the international system, particularly what the Charter termed the 'enemy states'.<sup>91</sup> It would be a

dangerous world in which Britain would bear many burdens. This was a further key feature of the international landscape that was expected to emerge.

Nor was that all. There was a persistent fear of *new* conflicts as well. ‘The shadows of victory’ were upon Britain, as Churchill put it in early 1945.<sup>92</sup> ‘After this war, continued the PM, we should be weak, we should have no money and no strength...’ In a telling remark, in May 1945 the Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden wrote of the end of the war with Germany that ‘I sometimes feel that we are entering a period like that of [the] second Balkan war transferred on to [the] world stage’.<sup>93</sup> This was an alarmingly bleak appraisal. Churchill shared his concern about war with the Soviet Union and had been pondering this since the summer of 1944.<sup>94</sup> The prime minister asked the Joint Planning Staff to draw up a plan for a hypothetical conflict with the Soviet ‘crocodile’ that would commence on 1 July 1945 and see Britain and the United States ally with Germany.<sup>95</sup> Churchill also requested a plan to defend against a Soviet attack on western Europe.<sup>96</sup> This fear drove his visit to Moscow in October 1944 where he sought to contain Stalin with the infamous ‘percentages agreement’.

At Chequers in early 1945, Churchill mused that when Germany had been defeated, ‘what will lie between the white snows of Russia and the white cliffs of Dover?’<sup>97</sup> There were rumours of rebellion among Conservative backbenchers over concessions in Poland.<sup>98</sup> Churchill warned the Kremlin that their ‘quarrel would tear the world apart’.<sup>99</sup> He told Roosevelt and Truman that ‘utter breakdown’ was probable and planned a diplomatic ‘showdown’ with Stalin, ‘on which the immediate future of the world depends’.<sup>100</sup> By the spring of 1945, a very high proportion of Churchill’s personal telegrams were taken up with the USSR and the threat to European stability posed by the Red Army and its local proxies in a power vacuum. ‘The tide of Russian domination’ was ‘sweeping forward ... on a front of 300 or 400 miles’.<sup>101</sup> This ‘constitutes an event in the history of Europe to which there has been no parallel’.<sup>102</sup> On 4 May 1945, Churchill telegraphed to Eden his fear that there was



‘very little [prospect] of preventing a third World War’.<sup>103</sup> ‘Never in his life had he been more worried by the European situation...’<sup>104</sup>

This was a nightmarish vision of war without end. Upon receiving news of the first American test of the atomic bomb, Alanbrooke recorded Churchill as being immediately excited and ‘seeing himself capable of eliminating all the Russian centres of industry and population’ in the event of war: ‘if [the USSR] insist on doing this or that, well we can just blot out Moscow, then Stalingrad, then Kiev...’<sup>105</sup> As the prime minister stressed, this planning was ‘precautionary’;<sup>106</sup> but from 1943 onwards, his position on national renewal cannot be adequately understood in isolation from his assessment of the wider context in which policy was made. The international and domestic realms need to be integrated if the public positioning of Conservative leaders – which proved to be so politically unprofitable in July 1945 – is to be grasped. The two arenas were intertwined, as the eventual Conservative general election manifesto made clear. Indeed, the international dimension had been present from the outset in that post-war strategic commitments accounted for a substantial part of Wood’s Budget outlines. Therefore if we are to properly understand the divergence between Labour and Conservative positions after 1942, we need to consider the different set of coordinates that their leaders used in shaping policy. A projected long-term war in the Pacific, policing the defeated states after victory, and a feared conflict with the Soviet Union were sources of anxiety that made domestic commitments difficult to give.

The refinement of arguments about renewal had established a consistent Conservative viewpoint. In 1944, this began to have an impact on the preparation of post-war policy. For instance, the 1944 Budget saw Anderson emphasise ‘important reliefs and reforms in favour of industry’, and he wanted the Excess Profits Tax (EPT) modified to allow companies to plan for the future with greater confidence.<sup>107</sup> The Chancellor and his advisers focused on laying foundations for economic competitiveness.<sup>108</sup> Anderson was convinced by Keynes’s argument that taxation was too high, and that ‘to put it [the revision of the EPT] off is a pure concession to misguided sentiment’.<sup>109</sup> On the matter of encouraging research he told the Governor of the Bank of England, Montagu Norman, that ‘as you know, this whole subject is one which interests me profoundly and I am personally convinced that if we are to keep our place in the world industrially there will have to be a considerable increase in research in future ... I therefore approach this topic with special sympathy’.<sup>110</sup> It was Anderson’s intention ‘to give full weight’ to the problem. Economic efficiency thus remained the overriding goal. Prosperity would ‘establish a sound economic basis for that better and fuller future which we seek to attain’.<sup>111</sup> The ‘better and fuller future’ – presumably a reference to expanded state provision – would have to wait for economic renewal. In his radio broadcast on the Budget, Anderson emphasised the likelihood of a prolonged conflict with Japan before declaring that ‘*our first thought, after war ceases to claim all our efforts, must be the rebuilding of our peacetime economic life*’.<sup>112</sup> Relation to a definite temporal situation defined virtually all of these arguments. It was not the case, then, that leading Conservatives were failing to think about the future; they had engaged in some depth with the question of post-war Britain, its timeframes and horizons. Rather, they had identified different priorities from those of their political opponents. Edgerton’s critique of the restrictive effects of the ‘social democratic historiography’ is a pertinent one.

Lyttelton developed the theme of technological research, rejecting the idea that ‘because the State in war is highly efficient in industry ... the same applies in peace’.<sup>113</sup> Instead he desired ‘the marriage of the organising power of the state with the free play of private enterprise’.<sup>114</sup> The Minister of Production stressed that the adoption of modern technology in industry was the most important single aspect of prosperity and thus employment.<sup>115</sup> The party’s Reconstruction Committee produced a detailed analysis of post-war industry in December 1943, which took care to argue for ‘The Moral Basis of Enterprise’.<sup>116</sup> Meanwhile Anderson ensured that the coalition’s 1944 White Paper, *Employment Policy*, was consistent with this theme. After laying out its aim as being the ‘maintenance of a high and stable level of employment’, the next paragraph in the White Paper made clear that this hinged upon exports, and went on that ‘employment cannot be created by act of Parliament or government action alone ... government policy will be directed to *bringing about conditions* favourable to the maintenance of a high level of employment’.<sup>117</sup> The Chancellor had committed the government to nothing more than seeking to create the *conditions* for low unemployment.<sup>118</sup> *Employment Policy* signalled that the government should stimulate the economy, but its ambitions were limited. Once again, for senior Conservatives the priority was creating a state of affairs in which prosperity could be encouraged and international trade resumed.

## VI

The concepts refined from 1943 onwards help us to properly contextualise the public message of Conservative leaders ahead of the 1945 general election. It is important to emphasise that Churchill did not want an election, preferring to keep the coalition together for as long as possible and certainly until the defeat of Japan and the resolution of the Soviet

question. Even as late as 11 May 1945, he telegraphed to Eden in San Francisco that ‘the Russian peril, which I regard as enormous, could be better faced if we remain united’ and went on express his fear that with the Soviets boasting ‘hundreds of divisions’ and in ‘possession of Europe from Lubeck to Trieste, and to the Greek frontier on the Adriatic’, there could be ‘a period of appeasement’ followed by ‘a third world war’.<sup>119</sup> He told Truman that ‘the enormous Muscovite advance’ across Europe meant that ‘the issue of a settlement with Russia before our strength has gone [through demobilisation] seems to me to dwarf all others’.<sup>120</sup> ‘If there is going to be trouble of this kind, the support of men like Attlee, Bevin [and] Morrison is indispensable’.<sup>121</sup> However, the coalition government promptly collapsed when Labour insisted on an election. Historians have largely focused on the campaign itself, exploring the Conservative party’s organisational problems and the impact of Churchill’s ‘Gestapo speech’.<sup>122</sup> Michael Kandiah rightly noted that the campaign ‘failed at all levels’.<sup>123</sup> Churchill was still taken up with diplomacy and the drafting of the election manifesto was rushed.<sup>124</sup>

Yet the manifesto itself needs to be placed in a long-term context. Despite its poor reception,<sup>125</sup> we should not overlook the fact that the Conservatives’ programme was, in its essentials, consistent with the attitudes expressed publicly and privately by their leaders over the preceding two-and-a-half years. Importantly, the first three sections of *Mr Churchill’s Declaration of Policy to the Electors* all dealt with international and strategic issues. The manifesto began by stressing that ‘Britain is still at war, and must not turn aside from the vast further efforts still needed to bring Japan to the same end as Germany’.<sup>126</sup> The anxiety felt by Churchill and Eden about the international situation was underlined as the document went on that ‘even when all foreign enemies are utterly defeated, that will not be the end of our task’, for Britain then had to ‘save the world from tyranny’. The source of this further ‘tyranny’ was not explicitly identified as the USSR, but the party had once again put forward the view that a

prolongation of international turmoil was likely. 'Britain and the World' was the first substantive section of the manifesto, followed by 'The British Empire and Commonwealth' and then 'Defence'. The manifesto's heavy emphasis on geopolitics conforms to what Churchill had told John Colville in March: that he was 'prepared' to put the Russian issue 'to the House and the Country with confidence in their support'.<sup>127</sup>

Churchill did not grasp that to most voters domestic matters were of greater importance than international wrangling. He had made the same mistake before. During the struggle over Indian constitutional reform in 1933, Lord Linlithgow warned Churchill that 'you are ... working yourself into a very poor tactical position', for 'the Indian problem does *not* interest the mass of voters in this country'.<sup>128</sup> And in 1922 he had planned to fight a general election on a platform of confrontation with Turkey, another idea that backfired.<sup>129</sup>

Nonetheless, it is striking that historians have never treated foreign policy as a major issue at the 1945 election – not least because it certainly *was* central to the Conservative message to the public, as a reading of the manifesto or Churchill's speeches makes apparent. This is a clear indication of the extent to which the historiography has been led by a welfarist approach. Only after three sections on strategic problems did the manifesto turn to domestic matters. Here, the Conservatives promised to release personnel from the military as quickly as possible, pursue an 'all-out housing policy' and seek an agricultural renaissance. The manifesto identified 'one of our most important tasks' as being to introduce a scheme for 'nation-wide and compulsory ... National Insurance' which would facilitate 'new and increased benefits': pensions, family allowances and sickness benefits were all discussed. It went on that 'we propose to create a comprehensive health service covering the whole range of medical treatment ... and to introduce legislation for this purpose in the new Parliament.'

On the task of rebuilding the economy, the manifesto stated that ‘free enterprise must be given the chance and the encouragement to plan ahead. Confidence in sound government – mutual co-operation between industry and the State, rather than control by the State – a lightening of the burdens of excessive taxation – these are the first essentials.’ And ‘all that we long to achieve’ was dependent on ‘attaining the highest possible levels of peacetime production as fast as we can’. ‘The British people’ had to ‘fix their eyes’ on ‘production’. Nationalisation would produce new monopolies under state control, ‘with no proper protection for anyone’, especially ‘the consumers’ interest’.

In a section on ‘Industrial Efficiency’, Anderson’s favoured themes of machinery and research were emphasised:

The more efficient British industry is and the fuller the use it makes of modern methods and materials, the higher will be the standard of well-being that is possible for our people. We will stimulate scientific research in industry and in the universities, and encourage the scrapping of obsolete plant and methods in every possible way.

The manifesto’s concluding message was stark. ‘The nation can have the services it is prepared to pay for. ... The revenue is not created by waving a magic wand. It is drawn from the fruits of the nation’s industry, agriculture and commerce. It is won by work and paid in taxes.’ And it struck a classically conservative note in affirming that ‘progress must be extended and accelerated not by subordinating the individual to the authority of the State, but by providing the conditions in which no one shall be precluded by poverty, ignorance, insecurity, or the selfishness of others from making the best of the gifts with which Providence has endowed him.’<sup>130</sup> Thus, the Conservative-run state would create only ‘the conditions’ for progress – while individual ‘Providence’ was allotted the same important role that it always occupied in conservative thought. Life would remain contingent and shaped by fortune.

## VII

Despite important efforts – most obviously by Steven Fielding – to qualify the ‘meaning’ of Labour’s landslide victory at the 1945 election, key elements of both academic and popular perceptions of this period have proven remarkably resistant to revision.<sup>131</sup> The explanation seems obvious: Attlee’s triumph still represents *the* iconic political moment for the modern British intellectual left. It carries a potent emotional appeal, a fleeting alignment between Labour and the public which in turn facilitated the birth of a post-war social democratic order. The Beveridge report, and its view of national renewal, is an indispensable component of this story, the popularity of its proposals acting as a vital enabling factor for Labour.

Moreover it is fair to say that *Social Insurance and Allied Services* and Labour’s victory have had many academic supporters, and few detractors; Corelli Barnett’s assault on the post-war order reflected a minority worldview. As a result, it is easy to see why the position adopted by Conservative leaders towards national renewal jars with the dominant ‘welfarist’ tradition within the historiography. The centrality of issues such as finance, trade and international turmoil to their arguments point to a more fluid and contested debate than the standard narrative that political debate in the second half of the war was one about welfare.

Myths about Conservative obduracy towards reform, first crafted by Beveridge and Labour propaganda, are still common. For example, Richard Carr recently wrote that ‘Conservatives who had little constructive to say – Churchill and Kingsley Wood were the prime examples – used the war quite adeptly as an excuse for saying nothing’.<sup>132</sup> But, as this article has demonstrated, these views are difficult to sustain and should be dispensed with. It may appear that Conservative leaders were simply stalling if the *Labour* view of national renewal is

accepted as marking out the legitimate boundaries of debate; but within the Conservatives' *own* worldview, that does not square with the evidence. Few politicians were as energetic as Wood in working through the practicalities of national renewal, a fact which underlines the Chancellor's status as one of the crucial, yet neglected, figures of wartime politics.

Meanwhile Churchill thought long and hard about the post-war international landscape, and sought – unsuccessfully – to communicate his anxieties to the public. One-dimensional depictions of the Conservative position provide succour to a social democratic view of developments, but actually tell us very little about how Conservative leaders themselves discerned the future.

The Conservative manifesto clearly lacked the appealing vision of that of the Labour party. A future of burdensome international dangers, economic uncertainty and incremental progress in social reform did not fire the imagination. But the document was consistent with a series of arguments developed by Conservative leaders from 1942 onwards. The programme placed before the electorate expressed their sense that, in an environment of continuing warfare, 'tyranny' and economic dislocation, priorities for state action would need to be carefully selected. *Mr Churchill's Declaration of Policy to the Electors* also reflected anxiety that any equilibrium between these competing claims could actually be found. In grappling with the practicalities of national renewal the party's senior figures had explored 'the future' with a seriousness that historians – focused on the Beveridge report – have not always allowed.

In turn this suggests a need to modify the popular suspicion that in resisting Beveridge the Conservatives were quietly hoping to recreate a Dickensian world of small state and minimal social provision.<sup>133</sup> One of the most significant developments within recent historiography of this period has been the emergence of new narratives to challenge the old. Edgerton, particularly, has attempted to complicate matters by showing that outside 'experts' from business were far more influential in Whitehall than (better known) social-democratic



intellectuals.<sup>134</sup> The polity that emerged from the war was highly interventionist on a range of fronts. Government as a whole had new horizons, irrespective of exactly how different parties sought to proceed. Ben Jackson has demonstrated how even early neo-liberal thinkers were interventionists and agreed upon the importance of welfare.<sup>135</sup> Moreover, the Conservative party had rarely been genuinely in hoc to free-market ideology.<sup>136</sup> What had shifted since the 1930s, though, was public demand. In a nation already being shaped by memories of that decade, the electorate would countenance no return to the world of *The Town That Was Murdered*.<sup>137</sup> Britain was also undergoing a change in collective attitudes towards material satisfaction.<sup>138</sup> The voters now had different views of the availability of public money. The Labour party proved more willing to feed these at the election. It would take the Conservative party several years to adapt.

This article has delineated how senior Conservatives responded to the problem of securing national renewal. It was an important moment of transition for the role of the state in a liberal democracy, and the Conservative position was more sophisticated than has usually been recognised. For Enoch Powell and other Conservatives these developments amounted to a revolution in the party's outlook.<sup>139</sup> Powell was perhaps thinking not only of the commitments made by Churchill, but calls such as that from Robert Boothby in 1943 for state control over credit and external trade in the post-war era, wide-ranging government interference in the market to stimulate productivity, and the establishment of an Economic General Staff.<sup>140</sup>

Far from being well-developed or fixed, the conceptual vocabularies of the period were in flux; the meaning of phrases such as 'renewal', 'reform' and 'reconstruction' was uncertain and malleable. Indeed the struggle to find satisfactory definitions arguably provided much of the motive force of subsequent developments. For men like Anderson, Churchill and Wood the issues were frequently temporal – a question of timing – rather than spatial, in the form of

debates about the frontiers of the welfare state. Much political argument has an important temporal component, hinging as it does on advancing points about the short- and long-term, the distribution of goods (and pain) across time, the rationale of prudence, the risk of premature gratification, and so on. The speed of the journey towards a desirable horizon, and what can be done en route, is often as significant as the destination itself. The Conservative stance on national renewal in the latter half of the war is a useful example of how politics can revolve around this. To the Conservative leaders' way of thinking, there was a danger that recovery would be undermined by the impatience of the *demos*. Conservatives believed that the rhetoric of Beveridge and Labour implied a 'Golden Age'; theirs, in contrast, was rooted in the here-and-now at home and abroad. That the rejection of these warnings at the ballot box came as a surprise to much of the party only underlined that Churchill and those around him had lost sight of political realities. But then their message was never likely to be 'music to the ears' of an exhausted nation.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War* (London, 1975) remains the benchmark. See also Kevin Jefferys, *The Churchill Coalition and Wartime Politics, 1940-1945* (Manchester, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> For example, Stephen Brooke, *Labour's War: The Labour Party during the Second World War* (Oxford, 1992); J.A. Crang, 'Politics on Parade: Army Education and the 1945 General

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Election', *History* (1996), 215-27; Steven Fielding, 'What did 'the people' want? The meaning of the 1945 general election', *Historical Journal* (1992), 623-39; M. Franklin and M. Ladner, 'The undoing of Winston Churchill: mobilisation and conversion in the 1945 realignment of British voters', *British Journal of Political Science* (1995), 429-52; M.D. Kandiah, 'The Conservative party and the 1945 general election', *Contemporary Record* (1995), 22-47.

<sup>3</sup> Laura Beers, *Your Britain: Media and the Making of the Labour Party* (London, 2010), chapter nine; Robert Crowcroft, *Attlee's War: World War II and the Making of a Labour Leader* (London, 2011); Andrew Thorpe, *Parties at War: Political Organization in Second World War Britain* (Oxford, 2009); Richard Toye, *The Roar of the Lion: The Untold Story of Churchill's World War II Speeches* (Oxford, 2013), chapter eight.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Thorpe, 'Myth and counter-myth in Second World War British politics', in Chris Williams and Andrew Edwards (eds.), *The Art of the Possible: Politics and Governance in Modern British History, 1885-1997. Essays in Memory of Duncan Tanner* (Manchester, 2015), pp. 121-42.

<sup>5</sup> There have been some limited breaks with social democratic accounts: see Corelli Barnett, *The Audit of War* (London, 1986), chapters one and two, and John Charmley, *Churchill: The End of Glory* (London, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Winston Churchill broadcast on BBC radio, 21 March 1943.

<sup>7</sup> Harriet Jones, 'The Conservative Party and Social Policy, 1942-1955', unpublished University of London PhD thesis (1992); Kevin Jefferys, 'British Politics and Social Policy during the Second World War', *Historical Journal* (1987), 123-44; Hartmut Kopsch, 'The approach of the Conservative party to social policy during World War II', unpublished University of London Ph.D thesis (1970); H. Redshaw, 'The reactions of the Conservative

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party to the publication of the Beveridge report – a matter of consensus’, unpublished University of Birmingham M.Phil thesis (2008).

<sup>8</sup> See John Ramsden, 'Winston Churchill and the leadership of the Conservative party, 1940-1951', *Contemporary Record* (1995), 99-119.

<sup>9</sup> On the importance of time in political debate, see Michael Freeden, *The Political Theory of Political Thinking: The Anatomy of a Practice* (Oxford, 2015), chapters three and seven.

Shaun Gallagher, 'Time in Action', in Craig Callender (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Time* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 420-38 is also stimulating.

<sup>10</sup> E.H.H. Green, *Ideologies of Conservatism: Conservative Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2002), p. 3. Recent work in a similar vein includes Clarisse Berthezene, *Training Minds for the War of Ideas: Ashridge College, the Conservative Party and the Cultural Politics of Britain, 1929-54* (Manchester, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> See also an important recent doctoral thesis: Kit Kowol, 'The Lost World of British Conservatism: The Radical Tory Tradition, 1939-1951' (Oxford D.Phil, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> But consult the recent biography, Hugh Gault, *Making the Heavens Hum: Kingsley Wood and the Art of the Possible, 1881-1924* (London, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Robert Crowcroft, 'Financial policy, coalition and Sir Kingsley Wood, 1940-1', *Twentieth Century British History* (2015), pp. 74-96.

<sup>14</sup> Jones, 'The Conservative party and social policy...', 70.

<sup>15</sup> Addison emphasised his own 'Lib-Lab' preferences in 'Destiny, history and providence: the religion of Winston Churchill', pp. 236-50 at 236, in Michael Bentley (ed.), *Public and Private Doctrine: Essays in British History Presented to Maurice Cowling* (Cambridge, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> David Edgerton, *Britain's War Machine* (London, 2011).

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<sup>17</sup> Ben Jackson, 'At the origins of neo-liberalism: the free economy and the strong state, 1930-1947', *Historical Journal* (2010), pp. 129-51.

<sup>18</sup> David Edgerton, 'War, Reconstruction and the Nationalization of Britain, 1939-1951', *Past and Present*, Supplement 6 (2011), 29-46, at 29.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Carr, *Veteran MPs and Conservative Politics in the Aftermath of the Great War* (Farnham, 2013), p. 177.

<sup>20</sup> Durham County Record Office, Cuthbert Headlam papers, diary, 18 Apr. 1943.

<sup>21</sup> Trinity College, Cambridge, R.A. Butler papers, RAB G16/100, diary note, 28 Apr. 1944; PREM 4/88/92, Kingsley Wood to Churchill, 28 Oct. 1942.

<sup>22</sup> K. Jefferys, 'R.A. Butler, the Board of Education and the 1944 Education Act', *History* (1984), 415-31.

<sup>23</sup> On Anderson's contribution to wartime government, see Robert Crowcroft, '"Making a reality of collective responsibility": the Lord President's Committee, coalition and the British state at war, 1941-42', *Contemporary British History* (2015), pp. 539-62.

<sup>24</sup> The 'smokescreen' was a 'thin' one: Roy Jenkins, *The Chancellors* (London, 1998), p. 401.

<sup>25</sup> CAB 66/33, WP 18 (43), 'Promises about Post-war Conditions: Note by the Prime Minister', 12 Jan. 1943.

<sup>26</sup> For instance, CAB 66/33, WP (43) 21, 'Social Security: Note by the Minister of Production', 13 Jan. 1943.

<sup>27</sup> For instance, Jeremy Nuttall, 'Pluralism, the people and time in Labour party history, 1931-1964', *Historical Journal* (2013), 729-56. Michael Bentley, *Lord Salisbury's World: Conservative Environments in Late-Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 2001), chapter one, is relevant.

<sup>28</sup> See José Harris, *William Beveridge: A Biography* (Oxford, 1997 edn.), chapters sixteen and seventeen.

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<sup>29</sup> For instance, Francis Williams, *A Prime Minister Remembers: the War and Post-War Memoirs of the Rt. Hon. Earl Attlee* (London, 1961), pp. 57. Attlee recalled that he was ‘a bit elevated ... he seemed to imagine that he was going to be a leader of the nation’ and thought ‘the war ought to stop while his plan was put into effect’.

<sup>30</sup> Though hugely popular, not all contemporaries were convinced by Beveridge. See, for example, the autobiographical novel, J.R. Merstone, *Are My Eyes Really Brown?* (London, 2013), p. 17.

<sup>31</sup> House of Lords, Lord Beaverbrook papers, BBK/D 489, ‘Kingsley Wood. Question and Answer’ (n.d.); Addison, *The Road to 1945*, p. 102.

<sup>32</sup> Basil Sabine, ‘The Finance Act 1941’, *British Tax Review* (1984), 185-90.

<sup>33</sup> Churchill College, Cambridge, Winston Churchill papers (accessed online), CHAR 20/2025-27, Wood to Churchill, 27 July 1941.

<sup>34</sup> Butler papers, RAB H77/34, Butler to the Secretary and Deputy Secretary of the Board of Education, 27 Aug. 1942.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> PREM 4/88/92, Kingsley Wood to Winston Churchill, 28 Oct. 1942.

<sup>37</sup> PREM 4/89/2, Sir Edward Bridges to T. Diash, 25 Nov. 1942.

<sup>38</sup> PREM 4/88/2, Sir Edward Bridges to Churchill, 24 Nov. 1942.

<sup>39</sup> CAB 66, WP (42), 507, ‘Outline of Statement on Reconstruction Problems: Memorandum by the Paymaster General’, 14 Nov. 1942.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> PREM 4/89/2, Sir William Jowitt to Churchill, 23 Nov. 1942.

<sup>42</sup> CAB 195, WM (42), 155, 19 Nov. 1942.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>44</sup> PREM 4/89/2, 'Secret. For PM Only. The Beveridge Social Security Plan' (memorandum from Wood to Churchill), 17 Nov. 1942.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Mass Observation archive (online), File Report 1538, 'First reactions to the Beveridge report', Dec. 1942.

<sup>48</sup> Mass Observation archive (online), File Report 1673, 'Social security and Parliament', May 1943.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> People's History Museum, Manchester, Labour party archive, National Council of Labour minutes, 17 Dec. 1942.

<sup>51</sup> CAB 65 WM (43), 14 January 1943, 'The Financial Aspects of the Social Security Plan: Memorandum by the Chancellor of the Exchequer', 11 Jan. 1943.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid; CAB 65 WM (43) 28, 12 Feb. 1943; CAB 195 WM (43) 28, 12 Feb. 1943 (emphasis added).

<sup>54</sup> CAB 65 WM (43), 14 Jan. 1943, 'The Financial Aspects of the Social Security Plan: Memorandum by the Chancellor of the Exchequer', 11 Jan. 1943.

<sup>55</sup> CAB 65 WM (43), 14 Jan. 1943, 'The Social Security Plan', 1 Jan. 1943.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> CAB 65 WM (43), 14 Jan. 1943.

<sup>58</sup> CAB 65 WM (43) 10, 18 Jan. 1943.

<sup>59</sup> Nigel Nicolson (ed.), *The Harold Nicolson Diaries 1907-1964* (London, 2005), 18 Feb. 1943, p. 306.

<sup>60</sup> CAB 65 WM (43), 14 Jan. 1943, 'The Social Security Plan', 1 Jan. 1943.

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<sup>61</sup> Mass Observation archive (online), File Report 1673, 'Social security and Parliament', May 1943.

<sup>62</sup> CAB 195, WM (43) 26, 8 Feb. 1943; CAB 66, WP (43) 58, 'Interim Report of the Committee on Reconstruction Priorities', 11 Feb. 1943.

<sup>63</sup> PREM 4/89/2, 'Beveridge Report', 14 Feb. 1943.

<sup>64</sup> CAB 195 WM (43) 29, 15 Feb. 1943.

<sup>65</sup> CAB 195 WM (43) 31, 17 Feb. 1943.

<sup>66</sup> CAB 66 WP (43) 255, 'The Need for Decisions', 26 June 1943.

<sup>67</sup> PREM 4/87/8, Churchill to Bridges, 18 July 1943.

<sup>68</sup> CAB 66 WP (43) 308, 12 July 1943, 'Paper on the Need for Decisions', 1 July 1943 (Wood's emphasis).

<sup>69</sup> Williams, *A Prime Minister Remembers*, p. 56 (emphasis added).

<sup>70</sup> Churchill papers, CHAR 2/450, James Stuart to Churchill, 28 Aug. 1942, and *Looking Ahead: Educational Aims* (Conservative party, 1942).

<sup>71</sup> Toye, *The Roar of the Lion*, p. 203.

<sup>72</sup> *The Times*, 22 March 1943.

<sup>73</sup> CHAR 20/67, Churchill to Wood, Anthony Eden, Jowitt and Hugh Dalton, 17 Dec. 1942.

<sup>74</sup> *The Times*, 22 March 1943.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Mass Observation archive (online), File Report 1673, 'Social security and Parliament', May 1943.

<sup>77</sup> Privately, of course, Labour figures were conscious of the constraining effect of Britain's dire economic position: see Richard Toye, *The Labour Party and the Planned Economy, 1931-1951* (London, 2003), chapter six.

<sup>78</sup> Toye, *The Roar of the Lion*, pp. 202-3.



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<sup>79</sup> Churchill papers, 20/72, Churchill to Harold Laski, 25 March 1942.

<sup>80</sup> CAB 66, WP (43), 31, 'Social Security: Note by the Minister of Production', 13 Jan. 1943 (emphasis in original).

<sup>81</sup> CAB 66, WP (43), 66, 'Priorities for Research and Development: Note by the Lord President and the Minister of Production', 15 Feb. 1943.

<sup>82</sup> David Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain, 1920-1970* (Cambridge, 2006), chapters two and three.

<sup>83</sup> CAB 66, WP (43), 465, 'Reconstruction Plans: Memorandum by the Paymaster-General', 20 Oct. 1943.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Churchill papers, CHAR 2/480, *Looking Ahead: Demobilisation and Resettlement* (Conservative party, 1943).

<sup>86</sup> CAB 66, WP (43), 467, 'War-Transition-Peace: Memorandum by the Prime Minister', 19 Oct. 1943.

<sup>87</sup> Ray S. Cline, *The United States Army in World War II. Washington Command Post: The Operations Division* (Washington, 1990), p. 346.

<sup>88</sup> Mass Observation archive (online), File Report 1887, 'People's attitude with regard to fighting the Japanese when the European war is over'. Aug. 1943.

<sup>89</sup> Churchill papers, CHAR 2/550, Churchill to Attlee, 18 May 1945.

<sup>90</sup> John W. Wheeler-Bennett and Anthony Nicolls, *The Semblance of Peace: The Political Settlement After the Second World War* (London, 1972), remains the classic account of preparations for peace.

<sup>91</sup> See the United Nations Charter at <http://www.un.org/en/charter-united-nations/>, particularly Articles 1, 5 (1), 24 (1), 25, 37 (2), 39, 53 and 107.

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<sup>92</sup> John Colville, *The Fringes of Power: Downing Street Diaries* (London, 1985), 23 Feb. 1945, p. 563.

<sup>93</sup> Churchill papers, CHAR 2/550, Eden to Churchill, 12 May 1945.

<sup>94</sup> CAB 81/124, JIC (44), 366, 'Russia: Anglo-US discussions on Post-War Defence Organisation', 22 Aug. 1944.

<sup>95</sup> 'Operation Unthinkable: the Russian threat to Western Civilisation', War Cabinet, Joint Planning Staff, 22 May, 8 June and 11 July 1945, accessed at

<https://web.archive.org/web/20101116152301/http://www.history.neu.edu/PRO2/>; John Charmley, *Churchill's Grand Alliance: the Anglo-American Special Relationship, 1940-57* (London, 1995), p. 103.

<sup>96</sup> CAB 120/691, Churchill to Ismay, 10 June 1945.

<sup>97</sup> Colville, *The Fringes of Power*, 23 Feb. 1945, p. 563.

<sup>98</sup> FO 954/20, POL/46/65, Robert Petherick to Eden, 30 March 1945.

<sup>99</sup> PREM 3/430/1, T675/5, Churchill to Stalin, 29 Apr. 1945.

<sup>100</sup> Warren F. Kimball (ed.), *Churchill and Roosevelt: The Complete Correspondence, volume three* (Princeton, 1984), C-910; *Foreign Relations of the United States: The Conference of Berlin, 1945, volume one* (Washington, 1960), Churchill to Truman, 11 May 1945, pp. 5-7.

<sup>101</sup> FO 954/20, POL/45/177, tel. 321, Churchill to Eden, 4 May 1945.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Alex Danchev and Daniel Todman (eds.), *War Diaries, 1939-1945: Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke* (London, 2002), 11 June 1945, p. 697.

<sup>105</sup> *Alanbrooke Diaries*, 23 July 1945, pp. 709-10.

<sup>106</sup> CAB 120/691, Churchill to Ismay, 10 June 1945.

<sup>107</sup> T171/367, 'The 1944 Budget', 3 Feb. 1944; T171/367, 'Note to Anderson', 13 Feb. 1944.

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<sup>108</sup> For instance, T171/367, '1944 Budget – a provisional view. Note by Mr Brittain', 2 Nov. 1943.

<sup>109</sup> T171/367, 'Budget Committee. Note by Sir Richard Hopkins. Annex: Lord Keynes on the EPT post-war credit', 4 Feb. 1944.

<sup>110</sup> T171/367, Anderson to Montagu Norman, 17 Nov. 1943.

<sup>111</sup> T171/368, 'Post-Armistice Period' (n.d.).

<sup>112</sup> T171/368, 'Budget, 1944. Broadcast. Final' (n.d.).

<sup>113</sup> Oliver Lyttelton, *Seven Points of Conservative Policy* (London, 1944).

<sup>114</sup> *The Times*, 7 Nov. 1944.

<sup>115</sup> Lyttelton, *Seven Points of Conservative Policy*.

<sup>116</sup> *Looking Ahead: Work. The Future of British Industry* (Conservative party, 1943), pp. 44-6.

<sup>117</sup> Cmd.6527, *Employment Policy* (1944).

<sup>118</sup> For a different interpretation of the White Paper, consult Keith Middlemas, *Power, Competition and the State, volume I: Britain in Search of Balance, 1940-1961* (London, 1986), pp. 90-2.

<sup>119</sup> Churchill papers, CHAR 2/550, Churchill to Eden, 11 May 1945.

<sup>120</sup> Churchill papers, CHUR 2/30, Churchill to Truman, 12 May 1945.

<sup>121</sup> Churchill papers, CHUR 2/30, Churchill to Eden, 13 May 1945.

<sup>122</sup> For instance, Richard Toye, 'Winston Churchill's "Crazy Broadcast": party, nation and the 1945 Gestapo Speech', *Journal of British Studies* (2010), 655-80.

<sup>123</sup> Kandiah, 'The Conservative party and the 1945 general election', 22-47, at 22.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> R.B. McCallum and Allison Readman, *The British General Election of 1945* (Oxford, 1947), p. 52.

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<sup>126</sup> *Mr Churchill's Declaration of Policy to the Electors* (Conservative party, 1945), accessed at <http://www.politicsresources.net/area/uk/man/con45.htm>

<sup>127</sup> Colville, *The Fringes of Power*, 7 March 1945, p. 570.

<sup>128</sup> Churchill papers, CHAR2/193, Linlithgow to Churchill, 1 May 1933 (emphasis in original).

<sup>129</sup> Lucy Baldwin, 'The recollections of a Cabinet breaker's wife on the government crisis, October 1922', in Philip Williamson and Edward Baldwin (eds.), *Baldwin Papers: A Conservative Statesman, 1908-1947* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 70-77, at 71.

<sup>130</sup> *Mr Churchill's Declaration of Policy to the Electors*.

<sup>131</sup> Fielding, 'What did 'the people' want?'.

<sup>132</sup> Carr, *Veteran MPs and Conservative Politics in the Aftermath of the Great War*, p. 177.

<sup>133</sup> A.W. Purdue described this suspicion as an enduring 'propaganda victory': see Purdue, 'The Myth of the Jarrow March', *New Society*, 8 July 1982.

<sup>134</sup> Edgerton, *Warfare State*, chapter four.

<sup>135</sup> Jackson, 'At the origins of neo-liberalism'.

<sup>136</sup> W.H. Greenleaf, *The British Political Tradition, volume two: The Ideological Heritage* (London, 1983), chapter seven.

<sup>137</sup> Ellen Wilkinson, *The Town That Was Murdered. The Life Story of Jarrow* (London, 1939).

<sup>138</sup> S.J.D. Green, *The Passing of Protestant England: Secularisation and Social Change, c. 1920-1960* (Cambridge, 2011), chapter four.

<sup>139</sup> Enoch Powell, *The Welfare State* (London, 1961), p. 7.

<sup>140</sup> R. Boothby, *The New Economy* (London, 1943), pp. 47, 65-8, 132-3.

<sup>141</sup> Geoffrey K. Fry, 'A reconsideration of the British general election of 1935 and the electoral revolution of 1945', *History* (1991), 43-55, at 51.